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# Conservatism, liberalism and ideology

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## CONSERVATISM, LIBERALISM AND IDEOLOGY\*

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### CONSERVATISM: DREAM AND REALITY

by Robert Nisbet

*Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. 118pp., \$9.95 (paper)*

### LIBERALISM

by John Gray

*Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. 106pp., \$9.95 (paper)*

### IDEOLOGY

by David McLellan

*Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. 99pp., \$9.95 (paper)*

All societies are more or less complex systems of rules, of symbols and signs directing and constraining individual behavior. The task of the social theorist is to analyze and uncover what order may underlie such structures. In this regard he faces at least two major problems. First, he has to determine how far the rules or norms which govern human action define the distribution of power, responsibility and resources, and so determine the relative value placed upon such goods as education,

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art and scientific inquiry, and how far the existing *structure* of distribution of power and resources is itself responsible for the prevalence of particular rules. Second, he has to determine how far the analytical methods he brings to the study of his subject are genuinely tools which facilitate social inquiry, and how far they embody presuppositions which do not so much aid investigation as pre-determine its results. In both cases the theorist confronts questions about ideology.

In the first case, the theorist deals with ideology insofar as he is forced to examine the problem of the relationship in any social structure between ideas and interests. For any worthwhile explanation of social action must offer some account of how material circumstances affect, or are affected by, the moral, religious, scientific and political beliefs, customs and conventions which obtain in a society. What the theorist cannot or should not do is uncritically to presume that the assumptions implicit in those beliefs or customs or conventions can themselves explain the operations of society. To do this would be simply to offer a report of a society's self-image, of its ideology, rather than to explain society's workings.

For example, it would be an inadequate explanation which described the agencies of the state (the legislature, the police, the various bureaucracies, and the judiciary) as disinterested servants whose actions are governed purely by their terms of reference and not at all by any more parochial interests. For this picture assumes that the distribution of power and resources is more or less the result of the state's functioning within the formal constraints that guide it. Thus legislatures, with the aid of a disinterested bureaucracy, make laws, which are upheld by the judiciary and enforced by the police, to serve the common good. Generally, this picture is not questioned by society: by its citizens or its non-state institutions such as the press.

Yet while each individual is at liberty to accept his society's public self-conception, the social theorist is not. His concern is explanation. And explanation demands that he look behind the self-image, behind what we might call the ideology, to see what kinds of social relations do in fact prevail. Many, if not most, social theorists recognize this. Thus theorists of the Public Choice school, for example, seek to show how the actual distribution of government expenditure is better explained by the nature and power of interest groups and the structure of incentives in society than by the public philosophy of the welfare state, while some Marxist theorists seek to show that the structure of social relations embodied in the legal and political order is merely a facade concealing the character of the more fundamental economic arrange-

ments that persist, arrangements in which the interests of one social class predominate. (To be a student, or critic, of ideology, however, it is not enough simply to look *behind* the facade or self-image. It is also necessary to explain how and why ideology is generated, and what part, if any, ideology plays in the workings of society.)

The social theorist also confronts a problem of ideology in a different sense. For if he thinks that the beliefs and conventions of society must be understood as largely governed by the prevailing structure of interests, he must also concede that his own methods of social inquiry, conforming as they might to what he thinks are acceptable scientific standards, may well be governed by something other than a disinterested concern for truth. In short, his arguments and inquiries may be less "scientific" than "ideological." They may be governed by presuppositions which reflect the interests of his society, or of his immediate social grouping (such as the scientific community), rather than by assumptions which are defensible by some more "objective" standard. Much of the argument in the philosophy of the social sciences has been about what kinds of social explanation can properly be regarded as scientific, and so as valid, and what kinds of explanation are "merely" ideological.

But what, precisely, is meant by ideology? This is a question which has itself aroused controversy. David McLellan's short book, *Ideology*, intended as "the briefest of introductions to an extremely slippery subject," is an attempt to get a handle on this problem. And the attempt is made by tracing the efforts of various thinkers, the first notable one being Marx, to "find a firm Archimedean point outside the sphere of ideological discourse, an immovable spot from which to observe the levers of ideology at work." Tracing the career of the concept over two centuries, McLellan also examines the different Marxist conceptions of ideology to be found in the writings of Lenin, Lukács, Gramsci, and Althusser, before turning to the non-Marxist traditions, and particularly to the work of Mannheim. From here he goes on to look briefly at a positivist claim which he thinks survives largely in America: that social science can be non-ideological. This opens the way for a discussion of the criticisms of this view emanating mainly from the Frankfurt school.

In an all too brief concluding chapter, McLellan identifies two strands of theorizing about ideology. In the first strand the dominant contrast made is one between science and ideology. This science/ideology dichotomy is to be found both in the Marxist traditions and in the empiricist English-speaking tradition, which differ essentially

over *conceptions* of science/ideology. The other strand of thinking, however, emphasizes the problems of studying society, suggesting that the social theorist cannot completely escape the interest-dominated perspective in which he finds himself.

### *Can Ideology Be Overcome?*

The conclusion McLellan moves toward in his attempt to elucidate the concept of ideology is that any successful account of ideology must recognize, on the one hand, the inadequacy of the science/ideology dichotomy, and on the other hand the inadequacy of any view suggesting the omnipresence of ideology. Ideology, he wishes to maintain, "is best viewed not as a separate system of signs and symbols that could be contrasted with—and eventually replaced by—another, e.g., science of some sort. Ideology is rather an aspect of every system of signs and symbols in so far as they are implicated in an asymmetrical distribution of power and resources." In effect, this means that the two problems of ideology confronting the social theorist are not, as my earlier distinction suggests, separate problems but, rather, aspects of the same problem. The social theorist is confronted by a world in which ideas play an important part, but also one in which those ideas are not wholly autonomous but are in some way related to material circumstances and interests. The ideas or methods he might use to investigate this world are themselves implicated in its operation; they cannot be viewed as, or refined into, neutral instruments with which we might dissect and analyze the rest of the world of ideas. We cannot use non-ideological tools to evaluate ideological phenomena. Thus it is unlikely that there can ever be an "end to ideology" as, he suggests, both the Marxist and the "Enlightenment, rationalist, empiricist" traditions have hoped.

It is difficult to evaluate McLellan's position, largely because it is offered in a series of critical observations about the arguments of the various theorists of ideology whose views are discussed in his book. He is admirably clear when elucidating the views of Marx, Mannheim, and Habermas, and in identifying the difficulties in their respective accounts of ideology. But little space is devoted to offering his own account of ideology, as opposed to indicating what such an account must do. It must, he says, combine two attributes: the first is "a hermeneutic subtlety which both sees that it is necessary to understand ideology before criticizing it and also adopts a self-reflexive attitude towards its own premises"; the second is a concern "to preserve the

concept's critical potential by linking it with analyses of control and domination, thereby extricating it from the labyrinth of relativism associated with the hermeneutic circle." Yet what precisely this means or would involve remains obscure and undeveloped. For if ideology is not to be contrasted with science, and is not pervasive or omnipresent but is, rather, an "aspect" of every system, what is ideology?

What I think McLellan may mean is that we can come to a better understanding of ideology if we look critically at the premises of our arguments—by seeking, as Mannheim suggested, their social determinants, and recognizing how they are implicated in the system of ideas which control or dominate human activities.

McLellan's recommendation is, I think, mistaken. If we try to come up with an account of ideology by following his strictures, by adopting a "self-reflexive attitude" toward the premises underlying our investigation, the first problem that emerges is that of how to adopt such an attitude. What is a "self-reflexive" attitude? If it is a *critical* attitude, the question is, how might one adopt such an attitude given that one's attitudes are already implicated in the ideological structure (and, arguably, beyond one's control)?<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it is unclear how adopting such a stance can help to uncover the nature of ideology. McLellan's suggestion that a successful account of ideology must recognize the need "to understand ideology before criticizing it" is even more puzzling. For it really tells us nothing about how we are in fact to account for ideology.

The problem is that McLellan's suggestion has it backwards. We cannot come up with an account of ideology, or what is ideological in the social world, merely by reflecting more seriously on the nature of our arguments and assumptions, and leaving the task of social criticism until this reflection is completed. Rather, it is the very process of criticism of theories, ideas and institutions which enables us to uncover what is ideological: what is the product of particular interests or generated largely by the dominance of particular social powers. By allowing criticism to eliminate false theories we place ourselves in a better position to identify those explanations which are ideological or founded upon some prejudice. This does not, of course, guarantee that we shall always be able to distinguish explanations sustained by ideology from those which are not. (And certainly, as McLellan himself notes, a theory whose success is determined by social factors is not for that reason alone false.) Yet it is only by exposing all explanations to criticism that we are likely to identify those of them that could *only* be

sustained by the power or dominance of particular social interests and therefore would not be able to resist critical challenge.

Now one objection which will be raised against the above view is that it is itself an ideological position. Or at least in part: as McLellan puts it, ideology is an aspect of every system insofar as its signs and symbols are implicated in an asymmetrical distribution of power. "And of which system," he asks us, "is this not the case?" Yet the objection is raised too hastily. For once it is recognized that the view that all explanations should be open to criticism must itself be open to criticism, we can see that it might well be sustained, not because of the strength of particular interests, but because it is logically resistant to attempts to refute it. At any rate, it would not do to brand this view as simply "ideological" without some argument *showing* why it is so.

None of this, of course, is to suggest that McLellan is wrong to say that ideology may be an aspect of all social systems. And indeed, he is quite correct to insist that any definition of ideology "whereby it is any and every action-oriented set of beliefs organized into a coherent system" is unduly restrictive, and "robs the concept of its critical edge." Ideology is a feature of the social world more generally, and not simply of belief systems. Yet not every aspect of the social world is ideology; so some account is needed of how we might distinguish ideology from other aspects of that world. One promising way of proceeding is to take up the contrast Popper offers (and which I discuss below) between ideology and objectivity, with objectivity understood as a feature, not of belief systems or of consciousness, but of the social world of ideas and explanations.

The virtue of Popper's view distinguishing ideology from objectivity (or science) is that it takes seriously the problem the theorists of ideology, such as Mannheim, identify: the problem of the social determination of ideas. Yet if we are all suffering under our own system of prejudices, Popper suggests, we must be even more radically skeptical than these sociologists of knowledge. This means recognizing that we cannot hope to purge ourselves of our prejudices by socio-analysis. We cannot "climb to a higher plane from which [we] can understand, socio-analyze, and expurgate [our] ideological follies."<sup>2</sup> For this reason objectivity is better understood as something we approach if the social order is one in which public institutions facilitate rather than obstruct free criticism of arguments, of beliefs and practices and of social institutions themselves.

*Can Liberalism Be Defined?*

This conclusion, however, raises the larger question of what kind of social order, precisely, is a defensible one. This is a question which McLellan's analysis does not take him to. But it is the subject of the two other books published along with his in the University of Minnesota Press series "Concepts in Social Thought." John Gray's *Liberalism* and Robert Nisbet's *Conservatism: Dream and Reality* describe and defend competing political visions which we might now examine with profit.

Both books define the philosophies they defend by contrasting them with rival political outlooks. And both share a common enemy: socialism. But before proper sense can be made of the similarities and differences between these two viewpoints, some terminological questions must be settled. The term "liberal," as has often been noted, has different meanings in Britain and in the United States. In Britain it is more readily associated with the classical liberal tradition, the tradition of political thought which has its roots in the writings of Locke, Hume and Adam Smith, and is more easily contrasted with the ideas of democratic socialism. In the United States, however, the divide between liberalism and certain forms of socialism is much less clear. Indeed, one prominent American defender of "liberalism," Bruce Ackerman, in his book *Social Justice and the Liberal State*, is willing to describe himself quite explicitly as a democratic socialist. So when reading John Gray's book it should be noted at the outset that the "liberalism" he defends is a form of classical liberalism. It should equally be recognized that the "liberalism" Nisbet criticizes is not so easily identified with the classical liberalism of Gray's account.

This terminological ambiguity does, however, present the occasion for the most striking, and interesting, thesis of Gray's book: that there is an important contrast to be drawn between classical liberalism and the "revisionist" liberalism of modern times. The decisive break in the liberal intellectual tradition in the last century came, he argues, "not with the abandonment of natural rights theory for Utilitarianism or the replacement of a negative conception of liberty with a positive one, but instead with a new and hubristic rationalism." For while the classical liberals of the Scottish Enlightenment, and French liberals such as Tocqueville and Constant, had recognized man's incapacity fully to grasp the complexity of society, let alone to control it, the new liberals "sought to submit the life of society to rational reconstruction." Thus while the classical liberals saw progress as a by-product of free ex-



change, the modern liberals in effect identify progress with the realization in the world of a specific conception of a rational society. This feature of modern liberalism may readily be identified in the thought of John Stuart Mill. The results of this intellectual transformation, according to Gray, are quite plain: "Once progress is conceived as the realization of a rational plan of life rather than as the unpredictable exfoliation of human energies, it is inevitable that liberty should eventually be subordinated to the claims of progress." And that is, undoubtedly, what we have seen in this century.

Yet this thesis raises its own question. If there has indeed occurred so decisive a break in the liberal intellectual tradition, what warrant have we for calling modern liberalism "liberal"? Why, for example, should John Rawls, whose work Gray praises, be regarded as a liberal—even if not a classical liberal? This question cannot be answered without offering a fuller account of liberalism, and of the philosophical ideals which lie at its heart; and this is what Gray's book attempts to do.

Liberalism, in Gray's view, constitutes a single tradition, rather than two or more traditions, in virtue of four shared elements which compose the liberal conception of man and society. First, liberalism is an *individualist* philosophy which asserts the moral primacy of the person against the claims of any social collectivity. Second, it is *egalitarian*, according all individuals the same moral status. Third, it is *universalist*, affirming the moral unity of humanity and giving secondary importance to specific historical associations. And, finally, it is *meliorist*, affirming the corrigibility and improvability of all social institutions and political arrangements.

On this account, Rawls's theory seems to fall clearly within the liberal canon and, indeed, Gray suggests that not even the many difficulties in Rawls's work compromise his achievement in developing an individualist defense of the liberal order in contractarian terms.

What is troubling, however, is that Rawls has tried (implausibly, as Gray rightly notes) to maintain that the conclusions of his theory of justice do not establish so much as a presumption in favor of free-market economic systems over socialist ones. Moreover, nowhere in his elucidation of his theory does Rawls accord any special weight to what many would regard as a fundamental liberal freedom: freedom of contract. What both of these observations point to is a distinction, implicit in the political theory of Rawls and other "modern" liberals, between economic and non-economic freedoms, a distinction which operates to deny the moral significance of the former.

But is it plausible to regard as liberals those who argue for a polity

in which the state is justified in extensive involvement in vast areas of individual activity, so long as it respects certain (undoubtedly important) freedoms such as freedom of speech and freedom of worship? Such "liberals" do indeed show all individuals "equal concern and respect" (to use the phrase Ronald Dworkin, a self-proclaimed liberal, employs), and they may also be described as "universalist" and "meliorist." But they also fail to emphasize the (classical) liberal concern that, as far as possible, individuals should have control over, and be responsible for, their own lives. The government, on this latter view, should show the individual less concern and more respect. Since the revisionist liberal view would disagree with this, it would seem that we can rightly regard it as liberal only if we maintain that according individuals control over and responsibility for their own lives is a secondary and not a fundamental concern of liberalism.

Now it may be that this is necessary if we are accurately to characterize the view of those modern liberals who, while in disagreement with the proponents of *classical* liberalism, are nonetheless closer to being liberals than they are to being conservatives or socialists. Yet if this concession is made, it will be necessary to recognize that several other theorists hostile to liberalism are by this account liberals. G. A. Cohen, Professor of Political Theory at Oxford University, for example, is a Marxist by reputation and by his own admission; yet his views incline him to defend a variant of market socialism in which individuals are entitled to the same freedoms that Rawls and Dworkin would allow. Does the fact that his political philosophy is individualist, egalitarian, universalist and meliorist mean that he too should be regarded as a liberal thinker?

None of this is, of course, to suggest that Gray is unaware of these difficulties, and his book, while thorough in its attempts to elucidate the conflicts and arguments within the liberal tradition, is also quite clear in its formulation of a particular *conception* of liberalism which he thinks worth defending. So we should turn now from these terminological issues to the more substantive question of what distinguishes liberalism from other social philosophies. And here the contrast Gray draws between liberalism and conservatism is instructive.

### *Is Conservatism Really Liberalism?*

What most clearly characterizes conservative thought, according to Gray's account, is a hostility to *rationalism*. This is not to say that all

conservatives have refused to engage in any theoretical reflection on political life, for we find in the works of Hegel, Burke and Oakeshott, among others, writings which are fully as systematic as anything liberal writers have produced. (Although one might query Gray's placing of Burke in the camp of "systematic" thinkers!) Nonetheless, conservatives have been highly critical of what they identify as the rationalist strain that runs through liberalism. And, in the end, conservatives insist that the central feature of political life, the relation between subject and ruler, cannot be explained or justified by liberal philosophy. For liberalism's universalist and egalitarian pretensions incline it to ask what kinds of relations involving authority are legitimate, and why? This question involves a denial of the particularity and moral separateness of historical communities which, in conservative thinking, cannot intelligently be subjected to criticism rooted in abstract generalizations about man. Thus "conservative thought proclaims its skepticism of the generic humanity and abstract individuality it sees celebrated in liberalism and insists that the human individual is a cultural achievement rather than a natural fact." Hence its central terms are authority, loyalty, hierarchy and order, rather than equality, liberty and mankind. Its emphasis is on the particularities of political life rather than on any universal principles it may be thought to exemplify.

Yet before we can use this characterization of conservatism and the comparison with liberalism to evaluate the worth of their respective theories of society, we need to ask how accurate is Gray's account of the conservative outlook. So we should turn to Nisbet's own version of conservatism to see how the views of one self-confessed conservative differ from those of a liberal critic.

Nisbet's variant of conservatism is in many ways difficult to categorize. His own view is that the conservatism he portrays takes Burke as its greatest "prophet," and much of his commentary is indeed informed by his reflections on Burke's writings. Yet at the same time he brings under the conservative banner thinkers as diverse as Hegel, Tocqueville, de Maistre, H. L. Mencken, Michael Oakeshott, and F. A. Hayek. Among these figures, Mencken is difficult to classify as a conservative in view of his disdain for authority; Hayek has denied that he is any sort of a conservative; and Oakeshott draws inspiration, not at all from Burke, but from Hobbes and Hegel. This might suggest to some that Nisbet's conservatism is therefore better identified as belonging to a distinctively American conservative tradition. But such a tradition has proven difficult to identify; and the problem is complicated by Nisbet's distancing of himself from what he sees as the popu-

list and non-isolationist strain in the ideas underpinning the Reagan presidency.

Indeed, when reading Nisbet's book, one constantly asks the question: can his brand of conservatism be differentiated from classical liberalism? After all, he emphasizes the virtues of minimal government and is highly critical of the welfare state; he defends a conception of liberty which repudiates accounts, such as that of Rousseau, which he takes to associate freedom with the subordination of the individual to the community; he places great emphasis on the role of property in a free society; and, while he stresses the importance of religion and the family, he rejects completely the attempts of the Moral Majority to secure these values more completely by using the state's powers of enforcement.

In spite of these predispositions which he shares with the classical liberals, Nisbet is a conservative nonetheless. The key to understanding why is to be found in the views he, and all conservatives, hold about the place of reason in political activity.

For Nisbet, the conservative's attitude to reason can be clearly discerned in "Burke's assault upon pure rationalism through laudation of the unconscious, the prerational and the traditional." For conservatism is suspicious of those who emphasize the use of deductive or "geometric" reasoning in human affairs. This form of reasoning, it holds, is of limited use, for human beings require for their nurture and advancement a different kind of reasoning which emphasizes the importance of feelings, emotions and experience as well as logic. The knowledge that such reasonings bring is not to be found in theoretical statements or formulations but in our traditions of behavior, in our prejudices. "Prejudice has its own intrinsic wisdom, one that is anterior to the intellect."

Underlying the appeal to prejudice is a particular view of the nature of knowledge which, according to conservatives, may be of two kinds. In William James's terms, the contrast to be made is one between "knowledge of" and "knowledge about." Knowledge of the first kind is primarily practical knowledge, acquired through experience or direct exposure to aspects of human life. It is not acquired consciously but is imbibed through the process of habituation. Knowledge of the latter kind is not so acquired. For we can learn *about* some things without direct experience of them. Thus we can learn about music without acquiring the knowledge of music that only musicians can have. And so it is, Nisbet suggests, in the sphere of politics: "Any lively imagination can come up with asserted principles or laws of government, but

only someone rich in knowledge *of* can provide the practical means of leading or otherwise participating in some actual government."

Those who do not see that political activity must be rooted in an appreciation of its practical character, and its dependence on practical knowledge, are rationalists. And they are the ones responsible for history's many misguided attempts to reconstruct society according to some grand, utopian design, or to reform society according to its own rationally discoverable first principles. The results of such attempts have usually been brutal tyrannies; and the will to resist tyranny and struggle for freedom, Nisbet suggests, comes not from "inner knowledge of natural rights or from inner instincts to freedom" but from prejudices: "prejudices slowly built up historically in people's minds: prejudices about religion, property, national autonomy and long-accustomed roles in the social order."

This attitude does, indeed, distinguish the conservative from the liberal. And it is to be found not only in Nisbet's work, but also in the writings of other modern conservatives such as Oakeshott and Roger Scruton. But how defensible is this view? For the immediate problem conservatives of the modern world must confront lies in the fact that, after several decades of growth, the welfare state may have succeeded in altering those prejudices which it is argued are necessary to resist tyranny. In much of Britain and Western Europe religion has declined, and throughout the West, even while attachment to property has not been entirely eroded, the importance of private ownership is no longer recognized. Moreover, it is difficult nowadays to think of political activity as grounded in experience and knowledge drawn from shared traditions of behavior. The spread of systems of mass communication and the mobility of peoples everywhere has made many societies highly pluralistic and characterized by competing, and indeed conflicting, traditions. It is unclear how the conservative's political prescriptions can be of help here. *Indeed, it is unclear what they would be.*

(Curiously, Nisbet also suggests that conservatives, like socialists but unlike liberals, have political *programs*. "The socialists have, just as do traditional conservatives, a complete and self-sufficient program for all seasons, which is something liberals, who tend to live in hand-and-mouth ideological circumstances, do not and never will have." Yet surely it must be the dreaded *rationalist* who is thought by conservatives to be "programmatically"?)

The problem conservatism faces is that, by placing so much emphasis on the importance of the practical knowledge embodied in traditions and social institutions, it can offer no account of how to deal

with undesirable social institutions or with traditions which might embody not knowledge but error. And clearly the modern world is full of institutions, such as the growing public sector bureaucracies, which many conservatives abhor. Indeed, conservatism can say little about how we identify those traditions or practices, whether nascent or well established, which promote great harms because they are rooted in error.

### *Must Ideology Be Conserved?*

These difficulties call our attention to the persistence of those unavoidable questions about the institutions appropriate for any society given the facts of human ignorance, of the complexity of the genesis of ideas, and of the prevalence of error.

The three books discussed here, despite their differences of focus, share a common concern insofar as they suggest solutions to the problems of understanding and dealing with the world of ideas, beliefs and practices. And they all see the importance for political theory of certain epistemological questions. So, at the risk of presenting a distorted view of the primary concerns of these three stimulating and provocative works, it may be worth concluding with a comparative inquiry into the value of their respective prescriptions.

What all three of these writers emphasize is the unsureness of our understanding of human society. Despite the best attempts of modern social theory to comprehend the workings of society, the fact is that its mutability, its variety, indeed its sheer complexity, leave the fuller understanding we seek difficult to attain. This problem is compounded by the variety of explanations and interpretations of society which appear, not only in competing traditions of social inquiry but in different moral and theological traditions as well.

The conservative response has essentially been to emphasize the difficulty of finding any appropriate standpoint from which to examine, understand and criticize society and its traditions. And because it sees great danger in attempts to do so, it prescribes an uncritical stance toward social institutions and the traditions, ideas and beliefs which sustain them. In this respect, we might say that the conservative attitude toward the prevailing ideology is one which presumes that it is difficult to comprehend and, to a large extent, must remain beyond criticism. The problem with this attitude is that it leaves conservatism unable to offer any guidance or advice to those who would evaluate

and seek to change or reform modern social institutions. At best, conservative philosophy offers us a description of society—and no more. (For conservatives such as Oakeshott, of course, this is all that political philosophy can do.)

The theorists of ideology, on the other hand, argue that ideas are part of a structure which reflects the dominance in society of particular interests, and which controls or exercises power over the way in which we think and choose. While liberation from such a situation may not be completely attainable, any step taken in that direction must be on the basis of an understanding of the nature of the ideology which governs us. Only when we see how our own perspective is distorted by the social determination of our ideas can we criticize the prevailing structure of thinking that dominates us. Thus Habermas, for example, tries to elaborate a situation in which communication is not distorted by social phenomena such as language. In contemporary society there exist profound barriers to what he calls “discursive will-information,” barriers to communication which make a fiction of the idea of accountability and serve simply to sustain belief in the legitimacy of that fiction. We can only criticize this if we can look at it from the perspective of members of a social system in which discourse does not suffer from these problems.

The difficulty with this view, as we saw in our criticisms of McLellan, is that it is hard to see how we might extricate ourselves from the dominating influence of ideology. And if, like Habermas, we see ideology buried in the very structure of language, it is hard to see how we can use language to construct or articulate a linguistic perspective which is not also cursed with the problems that beset every other arena of discourse.

Recognizing the problems associated with these two views, I would argue, points us in the direction of a more liberal attitude to the question of ideology. For the liberal view concedes that we cannot overcome the social determination of ideas, or control the power exerted by ideas in social life, except insofar as we insist on making our institutions open to criticism and change. Unlike conservatism, it sees many dangers in the uncritical embracing of prevailing traditions of belief or behavior, since they may embody not knowledge but destructive falsehoods. The liberal attitude calls upon us to accept that nothing may be deemed immune to question or criticism. And while Gray may be right to say that conservatives have correctly pointed to the “vital truth that the maintenance of moral and cultural traditions is a necessary condition of lasting progress,” this cannot mean that certain tradi-

tions must be insulated against criticism. After all, it is important to ask which traditions are of value; and our best hope for uncovering the answer lies in leaving that question open to critical inquiry.

This liberal view is rooted in a conception of the nature of knowledge which undercuts the conservative warning that such a rationalist outlook can lead only to tyranny. While it is true that the revisionist liberals have concluded that the "knowledge" uncovered by critical inquiry gives the state a warrant to act to reconstruct society for the better, it can do this only by according to some agency the authority to determine what must, for the construction of public policy, be taken to be true. For the classical liberal this is impermissible, for the generation of knowledge is made possible precisely because no agency is given the authority to establish conclusions which may not be challenged.

Against the theorists of ideology, on the other hand, the liberal argues that, while the prevailing ideas in society may well reflect the existence of more persistent relations of power and domination, this in no way suggests that there is not an important contrast between science and ideology. Moreover, if these relations of power are to be challenged, it is particularly important to recognize the liberal conception of science as growing only in a free society: in a society in which no one's conclusions are authoritative, and no construction is immune to criticism. It is only in such a society that the dominant powers may be challenged and overturned. Yet even here, it must be conceded, there is every likelihood that new forms of power and domination will emerge. In this respect, there can never be an end to ideology—not even in principle, as McLellan suggests. The best hope is for a society open to criticism and change so that no ideology may become so entrenched that it assumes the voice of authority.

#### NOTES

1. See Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1977), 222, where he notes: "The sociology of knowledge hopes to reform the social sciences by making the social scientists aware of the social forces and ideologies which unconsciously beset them. But the main trouble about prejudices is that there is no such direct way of getting rid of them. For how shall we ever know that we have made any progress in our attempt to rid ourselves from prejudice?"
2. *Ibid.*, 217.